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ABSTRACT

It has been argued that nonstandard dialects interfere with the attainment of literacy. The proposition that black vernacular English (BVE) has a measurably significant effect on reading achievement has never been demonstrated, although it is a widely held belief. What studies do reveal is an equivocal relationship between dialect and achievement in reading. As for dialect interference in writing achievement, studies comparing the writing of BVE speakers and standard English speakers do not yield strong support for the dialect interference hypothesis. These studies do not look at the impact, if any, of BVE on the meaning encoded in the written symbols. Although negative teacher attitudes have been advanced as an explanation for the low achievement of many children who speak BVE, the intersection of the two sets of variables--the negative attitudes of many teachers toward nonstandard dialects and the low achievement of many children who speak nonstandard dialects such as BVE--has not yet been demonstrated. A cursory examination of dialect interference in literacy attainment reveals methodological weaknesses and thus questionable conclusions. Studies should be designed and implemented, therefore, that are empirically sound and produce well reasoned and unbiased evidence. (HOD)

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Dialect Interference in the Attainment of Literacy--A Review of the Research

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In the 1960's, the predominant view of the linguistic performance of black vernacular English (BVE) speakers was that of language deficiency. This deficit model considered BVE to be underdeveloped, defective and restricted in significant ways. As an extension of this notion, various intervention programs were developed that ranged from quite informal to highly structured and which uniformly sought to remediate this deficiency, and to compensate for it. Because the children's language retarded their school performance, it was argued, remediating their language would facilitate their school achievement. Beginning about 1970, a language difference model has been propounded that says that BVE is a different, yet highly structured and developed system not inferior to standard English (SE) dialects (Stewart, 1970; Stodalsky & Lesser, 1967; Wolfram, 1970). Instead of being linguistically deprived, the language difference model says that black children in urban environments receive much verbal stimulation and participate in a highly verbal culture (Labov, 1972). For the language difference model, the school's instructional goal is not to obliterate or alter the child's native dialect, but, rather, to add to it and, thus, enable the child to use SE competently in those contexts where it would be preferred (Schwartz, 1980).

Despite the change in philosophical perspective, there continues to be a tendency to attribute casuality between the variables of dialect and underachievement in literacy because many black youngsters throughout the

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United States use BVE or some variant of it, and because many of these same youngsters achieve below national norms in reading and writing. Based upon the logic of conventional wisdom, the argument goes as follows--children who speak nonstandard dialects such as BVE do not achieve as well in reading and writing as children who speak standard dialects because syntactic, semantic and phonological features of the nonstandard dialect are at variance with these same features of the standard dialect. Thus, nonstandard dialect interferes with the attainment of literacy.

During the decade of the seventies, many studies were designed to find evidence in support of the notion of dialect difference as a correlational if not causal factor in the poor school achievement of dialect-speaking children. In this paper, I will review the results of studies on the relationship between BVE and reading, BVE and writing, and the effect of teacher attitude as an alternative hypothesis. From this review, I will draw tentative conclusions about the relationship of BVE and achievement in literacy, and make some recommendations on the course of future research.

BVE and Reading Achievement

The proposition that dialect has a measurably significant effect on reading achievement has never been demonstrated in fact, although it is a widely held popular belief. Hall and Turner (1974) for example, from a careful review of empirical data on the relationship between BVE and school success, found no support for the notion that dialect difference itself contributes to school failure.

What the studies do reveal is an equivocal relationship between dialect and achievement in reading. Table I summarizes the results of a number of studies on this relationship and indicates with a plus or minus whether the relationship was or was not observed.

TABLE I*

Summary of the Results of Studies on the Relationship between BVE and Reading Achievement.

Study	Grade Level	Reading Task	Evidence of Relationship
Frentz, 1971	3	Listening Comprehension	-
Hall, et al., 1973	1, 4	Listening Comprehension	-
Hooper & Powell, 1971	1-6	Listening Comprehension	+
Jones, 1972	Preschool	Listening Comprehension	+
Osser, et al., 1969	Preschool	Listening Comprehension	+
Ames, et al., 1971	4	Oral Reading	+
Bartel & Axelrod, 1973	9	Oral Reading	+
Brown, 1968	1	Oral Reading	+
Rosen & Ames, 1972	4	Oral Reading	+
Politzer, et al., 1974	K	Reading Readiness	+
Hockman, 1973	3, 4, 5	Silent Reading Comprehension	-
Nolen, 1972	2, 4	Silent Reading Comprehension	-

*Adapted from Harber & Bryen, 1976.

Two further studies which found no evidence in support of the dialect interference hypotheses illustrate how the methodology employed in studies of this kind can affect results. Flegenheimer (1975) presented two versions of the same story, one written in SE and the other in BVE to sixty second-graders. As might be anticipated, the use of BVE affected oral language production. However, the dialect did not affect the children's reading of the SE story. Reiter (1974) investigated the effect of BVE on oral and silent reading comprehension of fifty children in third grade. Subjects were first screened with the administration of a sentence completion test on their use of SE or BVE. No statistically significant differences were observed between speakers of BVE and SE on either oral or silent reading comprehension.

It would be tempting to conclude from a survey of the empirical evidence that no relationship actually exists between the use of BVE and reading achievement. This may, indeed, be the case. But, it is a conclusion that cannot be drawn because there are so many methodological variations and problems in the studies themselves. Rather than constituting a body of data whose facts, articulated and interrelated, yield to a synthesis, most of the studies stand as discrete units incapable of supporting coherent and consistent generalizations.

One major problem of studies in this area is the use of surface syntactical or phonological features as the criteria of dialect interference. For example, Frentz (1971) found no evidence of dialect interference in his study. Absence of the third person singular verb marker in grammatically simple sentences constituted the only feature of BVE employed in a listening comprehension. On the other hand, studies that explore the performance of BVE speakers on oral reading tasks invariably observe interference.

This is to be expected since the clearest manifestation of a dialect is in its phonological representations. Children who speak BVE sound different than those who speak SE, and this difference will be readily observable in the oral reading of SE material. Yet, as Harber and Bryen (1976) observe, this interference may be restricted to the most superficial surface features, and in no way impede comprehension of what is read.

Another major source of difficulty in the interpretation of this research resides in the definition of speaker of BVE. First, some studies make no attempt to screen subjects beforehand to determine whether or not they actually do speak BVE. Although Dillard (1972) estimated that approximately 80 percent of the black persons in the United States speak BVE, there is much evidence to indicate wide inter-and intraspeaker variability in the use of BVE (DeStefano, 1973). Regardless of income level, subjects ought not to be assigned to the BVE group in a study simply on the basis of race. Second, studies which do employ some screening procedure often incorporate, as noted earlier, items that survey superficial representations rather than sample language at the deep structure level. Finally, regardless of what kinds of items are employed to assess whether a subject uses BVE, all screening procedures limit the external validity of the studies by decontextualizing language use. Social context is a critical factor in determing what dialect a speaker will use (Labov & Cohen, 1967). Experimental screening procedures designed to increase internal validity nullify the impact of social context on language performance.

One other factor also makes synthesis of the findings of these studies difficult. This is the wide range in age of the subjects. The studies cited in Table I and the Reiter (1974) study which all measured listening comprehension employed subjects from the preschool level through the sixth grade. Dillard (1972) notes that there are important variations in the

use of features of the dialect according to age of the speaker. Some of the features of the dialect may disappear with increasing age, while others remain relatively stable. Thus, subjects' age, just as context in which the language is produced, must be considered important sociolinguistic factors that impinge upon the results of these studies.

BVE and Writing Achievement

Becuase the written form of language is designed to be adialectal, one might expect that the impact of a nonstandard dialect on writing achievement would be substantial. Moreover, because of the more formal nature of writing than speaking, and the only very recent emergence of a psycholinguistic perspective on writing that views errors not as random mistakes but as evidence of a developmental sequence in the mastery of writing (e.g., Beers & Henderson, 1977), there is even more concern with surface accuracy in writing than in reading. Yet, studies comparing the writing of BVE- and SE-speaking subjects do not yield strong support for the dialect interference hypothesis.

Rayburn (1974) found that the writing of third-and fifth-grade students more closely approximated SE than their speaking did. Among college students who spoke BVE, Terrebone (1975) found considerable divergence in the written production of the dialect. From an examination of nineteen compositions written by tenth-grade black students, Fasold and Whiteman (1971) observed inconsistent and weak evidence of the dialect. For example, fewer than half of the compositions showed omission of the third person singular present tense verb marker. Although Sternglass (1974a, 1974b) found that black college students in a remedial program produced more errors overall than white students, the errors were of the same kind and of the same proportion in both groups. Similarly, Kirschner & Poteet's (1973)

analysis of the errors in the writing of black, white and Hispanic community college students found no statistically significant differences among the three groups in either the kind or frequency of nonstandard usage.

Cronnell(1979) reports a series of three studies on the effect of BVE on spelling. In the first study, forty-three features which distinguish BVE from SE were identified and employed in a multiple choice spelling test with black and white second-graders. For each item, the responses included the correctly spelled word, one or two spellings that incorporated the BVE feature, and an equal number of incorrect spellings not associated with the dialect. The black subjects made significantly more BVE-related spelling errors than the white subjects did. In the second and third studies, sentences were read aloud by a female SE speaker. These same sentences were reprinted on test sheets with the test words deleted. The children had to fill in the missing words. Results found that on features where the dialects differ, BVE speakers made four times as many errors as SE speakers, but only twice as many non-BVE-related errors as SE speakers. In the third study, sixty-one percent of the BVE speakers' misspellings were associated with features of the dialect.

One might surmise that the critical factor distinguishing Cronnell's findings from those of the other studies is subjects' age. In the Cronnell studies the subjects were in the early elementary grades whereas in all but one of the studies cited earlier, subjects were at the secondary or college level. Groff (1980) reports that only a few features of BVE continue to have a substantial effect on spelling by the intermediate grades. Continued exposure to the written form of language aids in the mastery of written language, and nullifies the effects of nonstandard dialect. Thus,

the variable of age must be noted when analyzing the results of studies on writing and BVE.

Hartwell's (1980) conclusion that all apparent dialect interference in writing is related to reading, an imperfect mastery of the print code, points up the necessity of including information on subjects' reading achievement in investigations of writing. Very often, however, the impact of this variable is obliterated when black subjects are selected solely or predominantly from low-income samples in which the level of reading achievement typically falls below notional norms.

This latter problem is related to yet another, the almost arbitrary assignment of subjects to BVE- and SE- speaking groups on the basis of race. For example, Cronnell says "Actual speech of the students was not studied, but observation indicated that the students at the white school spoke SE and those at the Black school, BE" (1979, p. 83). All the points raised about proper screening procedures in the section on BVE and Reading Achievement apply with equal potency here.

Finally, studies of dialect interference in writing seem totally concerned with narrowly grammatical indices of surface features such as standard English spelling. Although correctness of form is important to precision in writing, it is almost wholly removed from the more important characteristics of style, coherence, clarity and interest. These studies do not look at the impact, if any, of BVE on the meaning encoded in the written symbols.

BVE and Teacher Attitude

Contradictory findings on the relationship between BVE and achievement in reading and writing have led to an alternate hypothesis to account for the low achievement of many children who speak BVE. According to this

hypothesis, it is not the features of the dialect that interfere with school achievement, but, rather, the negative attitudes of teachers toward the dialect. Thus, while Goodman (1965) at one point argued that the mismatches between the child's nonstandard dialect, and the standard dialect encountered in beginning reading materials account for reading difficulties, he later rejected this argument. With Buck, Goodman (1973) proposes that achievement in reading may be affected more by the negative valence attached to nonstandard dialects in school settings than by characteristics of the dialects themselves.

Indeed, there is empirical evidence to support the existence of negative attitudes towards BVE. Williams and Whitehead (1973) conducted an investigation which found that teachers tend to rate children on the basis of their use of BVE as less confident and less eager than children who do not use this dialect. Using data collected in a large scale study of Title I reading programs, Calfee and Drum (1978) found that most teachers have negative attitudes toward nonstandard dialects. Harber and Beatty (1978) also report that teachers tend to rate BVE-speaking children as lower in social class, less intelligent and less apt to do well academically than SE-speaking children. In a survey of ninety-four midwestern elementary school teachers in which they rated miscue items as acceptable or unacceptable, Tovey (1979) found that sixty percent of the teachers rated dialect miscues as unacceptable, while only sixteen percent rated syntactically and semantically acceptable miscues as unacceptable reading performance.

We must reject the harboring of any prejudicial attitudes and behaviors towards students as antithetical to the egalitarian principles of democracy. However, studies which report negative attitudes of teachers do not, in and of themselves, support either a casual or correlational relationship between teacher attitude towards BVE and achievement of BVE-speaking children. The evidence favoring a relationship between teacher expectations and pupil

performance in general (the Pygmalion effect) is muted, at best. We do know that many teachers harbor negative attitudes toward nostandard dialects, and that many children who speak nonstandard dialects such as BVE underachieve in reading and writing. However, the intersection of these two sets of variables has not been demonstrated as yet.

In addition, some studies of teacher attitude towards nonstandard dialects fail to control sufficiently the confounding variables of race and socioeconomic status. It is important to isolate the variable of dialect and vary those of class and race to determine whether it is the language itself or language as a marker of class and/or ethnic group that arouses negative attitudes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Even a cursory examination of the research on dialect interference in the attainment of literacy reveals methodological weaknesses that make questionable the synthesis of findings into justifiable conclusions. Among the problems encountered in this research are: failure to control for important variables such as subject's age and reading proficiency; inadequate screening procedures for subjects' use of BVE and SE; contamination of the variable of attitude toward nonstandard dialect with associated variables of attitude toward race and socioeconomic status; and incomplete sampling of the features of nonstandard dialect.

An obvious remedy for the problems noted above would be to design and implement studies that are empirically sound. This is warranted not only to rectify the misconceptions that surround current findings, but also because it is important to have well-reasoned and unbiased evidence on issues that are politically sensitive, namely learning how to read and write and the role that dialect plays in this task.

But, at least equally as important, is to incorporate into the design of the research a conception of what reading and writing are. If reading is the reconstruction, at least in part, of the meaning encoded in written symbols by the writer, then studies that investigate dialect and reading achievement must look at how dialect interferes with the reader's reconstruction of meaning. Studies that concentrate only on disparities in surface features of standard and nonstandard dialects yield only superficial information on dialect interference. The same holds true for studies of writing performance.

It appears that the effect of dialect may change from consistent to idiosyncratic as children grow older. One profitable avenue for investigation, therefore, would be to study longitudinally the diffusion of dialect effects within one sample on their reading and writing performance. Moreover, a general change in focus of both research and instructional programs from points of disparity in dialects to areas of congruence would seem to be in order. First, because in American English there is more consonance than dissonance amont extant dialects, standard and nonstandard.* And, second, because such a tactic would build on strengths rather than concentrate on weaknesses, and help to establish cohesion rather than heighten disintegration among children.

*Gullah is perhaps the single exception.

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